# Governance, rights and the demand for democracy: evidence from Bangladesh

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## INTRODCTION

Over the last twenty years, interest in good governance has progressively become more intense and focused. In part this reflects a conviction shared by academics, policy makers and practitioners that good governance can positively influence a range of key issues including poverty reduction, economic growth, the efficiency of service provision, the impact and effectiveness of development programmes, and the building of more inclusive societies (Kaufmann et al 1999, 2002; McGillivray et al 2005). Conversely, poor quality governance is considered a barrier or hindrance to growth and wellbeing, and an incubator for corruption, violation of rights, discrimination, violence and disorder. At least this is how the theory goes. However – and not for the first time in its history - the experience of Bangladesh appears as something of a paradox when looked at from a less normative perspective. Of late therefore it has become almost a truism to note and then question the co-existence of two informed observations about modern Bangladesh. On the one hand, the country has made significant and consistent progress in socio-economic terms. It has thus enjoyed steady and prolonged macro economic growth rates, fuelled by manufacture and remittance growth; made significant progress in relation to many of the MDG targets; and reduced the proportion of the population in poverty from 40% in 2005 to 31.5% in 2010 (World Bank 2013, BBS 2010). On the other hand, Bangladesh's performance in governance terms has been poor, epitomised in its classification by Transparency International for five successive years (2001 – 2005) as the world's most corrupt country. The co-existence of poor governance with successful growth and poverty reduction raises many questions and puts some core development assumptions to the test. Where some might see paradox in all of this, others may see collision. At a minimum, the post 1990 history of Bangladesh tells us that the two observations are not mutually exclusive.

Governance discussions in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the world, were originally steeped in a commitment to an alliance, uncontested since the end of the Cold War, of liberal democracy and market-based economic growth. This global commitment dovetailed nicely with political developments in Bangladesh, in particular the reintroduction of formal electoral democracy in 1990. The onset of electoral democracy witnessed a radical shift in the country's political landscape with both the military and the bureaucracy visibly withdrawing from front line politics to allow for the emergence of a new political class (Blair 2010). With the exception of the 2007-2008 hiatus when

the military remerged as the *de facto* backers of the caretaker government, electoral politics has helped institutionalise a form of democratic governance in Bangladesh which has remained intact and relatively stable albeit, as the contributions to this volume attest, deeply problematic. Since the introduction of formal democratic politics, Bangladesh has gone on to almost effortlessly pass Huntington's famous two turnover test (Huntington 1990). At the same time however, electoral politics has evolved into a de facto two party system in which both parties 'compete' for the right to monopolise the political system and dominate both public and private institutions. The competition is zero-sum orientated, and profoundly impacts the nature and dynamics of party-state relations as well as state-society relations. The result of this democratic process is an aggressive and unforgiving polarised political landscape, in which the interests of the state and those of the party in power, are almost completely aligned.

Commitment to democracy is not just concerned with formal political processes and actors but also citizenship identity and practices. Bangladesh remains a relatively young country and democracy was one of the four founding principles of its first Constitution. Many citizens therefore have firsthand experience of the struggle for independence and democracy, and this memory is kept alive in the imagination of younger generations. However while there seems to be strong public support for democracy (Duncan and Williams 2012), we know far less about the ability of citizens to meaningfully contest and hold the state to account. Some have argued that the room for manoeuvre to promote and protect citizenship rights in Bangladesh is highly restricted, and Wood's (2000) analogy of Bangladesh society as a prison encapsulates this perspective nicely. Others however have argued that social relations are more fluid and have pointed to evidence of stronger citizenship identity and practices in cases where these relations are supported in the right way (Kabeer 2011). Even in this relatively more optimistic scenario however, Kabeer admits that attempts to change existing power structures are "constantly undermined by various forms of unruly practices on the part of the more powerful sections of society" (*ibid*:352). In any case, it appears that the re-introduction of formal democracy has not automatically resulted in a wider establishment of substantive citizenship rights. A significant part of the explanation for this takes us back to the power of the political parties. In other words, the nature and dynamics of citizenship is fundamentally shaped by the political hegemony resulting from the competition between the two parties vying for power. If therefore we consider citizenship based or formal electoral practices, we arrive at a similar conclusion: that the form of democracy which has evolved in Bangladesh has become a core part of the 'governance problem' rather than a solution.

This context leads us directly to the key question which underpins this chapter. Through an analysis of new empirical data, we want to explore the extent and nature of public support and commitment to democracy in Bangladesh. There are a number of converging reasons why this question is hugely significant. **First**, we have relatively little information on public perceptions, expectations and demands for democracy in Bangladesh. The 2008 *State of Governance Report,* published by the Institute of

Governance Studies, is one of the very few attempts to look at public attitudes about political legitimacy and performance in Bangladesh (IGS 2008). **Second,** governance analysis and reforms have tended to focus almost exclusively on the supply measures of governance (for example, strengthening state institutions, capabilities and accountability) and given scant attention to demand measures (Wood and Landell Mills 2010). In part, as we have argued in our previous point, this is because we know so little about the demands for democracy, and know even less about how then to support these. The danger however with an exclusive focus on supply side measures, as Wood and Landell Mills rightly argue, is that it assumes that political elites are willing to engage with progressive change. This is clearly not a robust assumption in the case of Bangladesh. By looking at the demand side of governance, we therefore hope to better balance our understanding of governance dynamics. **Third**, by examining attitudes about political life and practices, we are able to look also at the extent to which particular governance arrangements are valued and likely to elicit public support and commitment. This is important because the so called 'democratic project' can translate into a myriad of institutional forms and arrangements, and different political settlements. Gauging the aspirations and preferences of citizens is a first and important step to understand which settlements are likely to gain more or less support; and by implication, acquire greater or weaker legitimacy in Bangladesh.

Recently, our understanding of public opinions towards democracy has taken strides forward with the emergence of different 'democracy barometers'. Work on the barometers aspires to rebalance political analysis by combining concerns about 'what people think and aspire to' with the more traditional research focus on the actions and behaviour of political elites and organisations. The barometers have also opened up a number of new substantive areas of research including trying to understand what values or aspirations shape people's support for democratic regimes. Bratton and Mattes 2001 (see also Mattes and Bratton 2007) for example analysed data from the Afrobaramoter to examine the extent to which citizen demand for democracy was a principled affair (i.e. reflecting intrinsic support) or relied on the performance of governments (i.e. reflecting instrumental support). Their analysis led to two conclusions. First that citizens support for democracy did not depend on a regime's economic performance, suggesting that democracy was valued for what it is (i.e. as an end in its own right) rather than what it can do (i.e. as a means). Second, this intrinsic commitment to democracy however did not mean that governments could do what they wanted or act in a wholly unaccountable manner. Regime performance therefore remained important in terms of citizen support and legitimacy building. However and perhaps counter intuitively, it was the ability of governments to provide 'political goods' such as the rule of law and the protection of freedom as opposed to economic ones which influenced citizens' assessment of performance. In another article, Bratton and colleagues take this idea further by testing it against a Globalbaramoter which includes the Latino barometer, the Afrobarometer, the Asian barometers and the Arab barometer (Chu et al 2008). Not surprisingly, they found that people across the globe support

democracy for quite different reasons. However across three of the regions, they found that popular approval for democracy depended more on the delivery of political goods than it did on economic ones. Latin America was the exception where national economic conditions were prioritised more than political considerations, but only marginally so.

This kind of analysis is relevant to the context of Bangladesh and is central to the argument of this chapter. While there is evidence of general public support for democracy in Bangladesh (IGS 2008, de Souza *et al* 2008), we do not know if that support has any depth, or if that support could be equally extended to different types of democratic governance arrangements. Reflecting on the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic support for democracy therefore gives us an analytical lens to examine the nature of the political process in Bangladesh. Furthermore, while it is safe to assume that the survival of all democratic regimes depends to some extent on government performance, the priority given to 'political goods' as highlighted by the work of Bratton and colleagues, is significant. These political goods typically include the rule of law, the curtailing of corruption, the protection of rights and freedom, the ability of citizens to change government by lawful means and so forth – a list which mirrors many of the priorities included in good governance programmes. While successive Bangladesh governments have managed to deliver relatively strong economic goods, it is precisely their performance in delivering political goods which has cast a long and murky shadow over the current governance landscape.

## GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: BETWEEN FRUSTRATION AND HOPE

Since the reintroduction of electoral democracy in 1991, Bangladesh's democratic journey has faced a number of challenges. Two of these challenges are particularly relevant to our discussion. The first challenge, alluded to in our introduction, relates to the dominance of the country's two main political parties: the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party; and in particular to the confrontational relations between them. The democratic experience in Bangladesh is one in which the party in power adopts a winner-takes-all approach and monopolises the state apparatus, while the losing party normally ends up boycotting parliament and pursuing a strategy of protest and disruption outside of parliament through *hartals* and street violence. The second challenge is the rising prominence of the religious right in mainstream politics and the place of political Islam in relation to Bangladesh's commitments to secularism and religious pluralism. Below we look at each of these in more detail. .

Although many parties contest national elections in Bangladesh, only four (Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiyo Party and the Jamaat Islami party) are serious contenders for parliamentary seats; and only two (Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party) ever win the elections. Since the reintroduction of democracy in 1991 therefore, the two leading parties have moved from a position of

prominence to one of dominance, creating effectively a two party system. This party system is remarkably stable and robust and yet at the same time, is built on relations which are vitriolic, violent and devoid of trust. Commentators have explained the endemic violence and lack of accountability in Bangladesh's democratic system as the result of a 'politics of vengeance' (Riaz, 2004) and the 'politics of distrust' (Quadir, 2010), where intense political rivalry and the opposition's party's de facto non-acceptance of the legitimacy of the party in power poses a constant threat to the democratic system itself.

Political competition between the two parties is organised through patron-client relations that stretch across public institutions and the private sector and are also deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society reaching right down to urban slums and rural areas (see Kochanek 1993, Khan, 2005. Patronage is mobilised both vertically - through a chain of *neta-karmi* (leader-worker) relations based on kinship, localised and personalised ties; and horizontally -where the party in power uses the state machinery to distribute resources to maintain support groups in every sphere of public life (Islam, 2002, Osman, 2010).

In governance terms, this results in the conflation of the interests of the state with the party that comes into power. Public institutions such as the civil service and the judiciary exhibit high degrees of politicisation with recruitment and promotions being determined on partisan terms (see SOG 2006, SOG 2008). Bangladesh is also one of the most centralised countries in the world (World Bank 2010) which means that the ruling party has a firm control over the operations of local government institutions, the dynamics of local politics, and the disbursement of sizeable development funds. In line with a winner-takes-all form of politics, major development projects tend to go to areas controlled by the ruling party while constituencies loyal to opposition parties are often excluded or at best under-resourced.

Consequently, the party in opposition plays less of a constructive role in the democratic system and concerns itself mainly with contesting the legitimacy of the party in power and toppling its government (Quadir, 2010). The culture of parliamentary boycotts illustrates this point well (Rahaman, 2007). For example, the AL boycotted 156 out of 382 days of parliament working days during the BNP's government of 1996-2001, whereas the BNP and its allies boycotted 222 of the 373 parliament working days over the tenure of the AL government of 2001-2006 (Rahaman, 2007, p. 110). Over time, the politics of boycotting has been ramped up. At the moment, the 'main opposition party' (BNP) has no seats in Parliament having decided to completely boycott the 2014 elections, after having set a record for the number of boycotted days in the previous Parliament. The immediate result of boycotting is that political opposition is removed from Parliament and played out mostly in the streets through the medium of party-led *hartals* (strikes). Historically *hartals* played a crucial role in mobilising dissent and protest against colonial powers in Bangladesh and other parts of South Asia. Today however they are more associated with intimidation, violence and coercion; and inflict

huge costs – financial and otherwise – on the nation as a whole. In 2003, the UNDP undertook a nationwide opinion survey to assess public perceptions on the use of *hartals.* While 73% of the 3,058 respondents believed that *hartals* were legitimate modes of protest as citizens have the right to dissent, 95% believed they had a negative impact on the economy, 92% claimed that they were not effective in pressurising the government to institute change, 51% identified parliamentary debate as an alternative to *hartals,* and 50% believed politicians gained financially from *hartals* (UNDP, 2005).

Political violence routinely comes to a head in the run up to national elections, and it was in the face of this challenge that the 13th Constitutional Amendment in 1996 introduced the provision for a neutral caretaker government to oversee national elections in a fair and impartial manner, and the subsequent introduction of a new government. The system, often heralded as a unique feature of Bangladesh's democracy, was in place for the parliamentary elections of 1996, 2001 and 2008. In the run up to the ninth parliamentary election, fixed for 22 January 2007, the leading political parties refused to agree on a candidate to lead the caretaker government. This opened up space for the military to move in and allow the President to become the de facto leader of the caretaker government. Quickly, opposition parties objected and this led to increased violence and protest on the streets. In response, the President imposed a state of emergency on the 11 January 2007. The very next day a military backed caretaker government, with donor support, was appointed to run the country. This government remained in power for two years and set out to clean up politics and deal with corruption in order to create a level playing field for the next national election. These two years put Bangladesh's democratic commitments to the test (see Ahmed, 2011). Although initially there was some citizen support for the new caretaker government, over time this faded as a result of what appeared to be an authoritarian approach which included arrests without charge and the heavy-handed influence of the army. This led to a popular demand for the restoration of democracy through national elections (Alamgir, 2009). The Awami league government which came into power after a landslide victory in 2008 introduced a 15th amendment in June 2011, which abolished the system of caretaker government along with strict provisions against future military take-over of state power, stating that such acts would be treated as treachery and subversion. Paradoxically it was Awami League who led the campaign to have the caretaker government introduced and in line with the pendulum politics of Bangladesh, it is the Bangladesh Nationalist Party which has been leading the call for its reintroduction over the past few years!

One of the general theses about Bangladesh – and which this chapter will directly engage with – is that although the quality of democracy may be wanting, people are steadfast in their commitment to democracy. This argument is often used, especially in the context of the events following 9/11 and the global discourse on the 'war on terror', to showcase Bangladesh as a Muslim majority country with a high regard for political freedom and secularism. Like democracy, secularism is one of the founding pillars of Bangladesh first constitution. However even the first government of Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman quickly began to court Islamic political opponents who had been defeated by his political agenda based on 'Secular Bengali Nationalism'. Shifts in ideological associations, religious or otherwise, have come to characterise successive political leaders in Bangladesh. This ideological oscillation has allowed for the emergence and growth of religious parties, most notably the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh; and the establishment of Islam as the state religion in 1998. While these changes are often credited to the military regimes of Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) and Hussein Mohammad Ershad (1982-90) who allegedly courted JIB in order to earn legitimacy for military rule and win the approval of oil-rich Middle Eastern Islamic countries who were a major source of foreign aid (Hasan, 2011), political leaders in the post 1990 democratic regime have also been busy to make tactical use of religious ideologies in order to mobilise support and outflank their competitors. On 1 August 2013, the high court declared that the registration of the country's most prolific Islamic party (Jamaat-e-Islami ) was illegal and as a consequence banned it from participating in the next parliamentary elections. This news was greeted by some as a victory of Awami League over Jamaat-e-Islami , of secularism over religious based parties. However following the ruling, the Awami League publically distanced itself from any move to ban Jamaat-e-Islami, partly for fear of a potential backlash accusing them of being against religion. Religious parties in Bangladesh have always been electoral fringe players (Khondker, 2010) but religion continues to influence government decisions, its social policy strategies (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2006), and make itself more visible in social and public life (Devine and White 2012). Both religious and secular ideologies therefore are important for the main political parties, and leaders are content to tactically associate with both ideologies and distance themselves from any 'bad press' associated with either.

More recently the question of militant Islam has also risen to prominence with Bangladesh being seen by some as a home to more radical and fundamentalist elements (Seabrook 2002, Riaz 2004, Uddin 2006). There is no doubt that in Bangladesh, Islamic militancy is indeed a 'complex web' (Riaz 2008), capable of the kind of mobilisation that was implemented in 2005 to carry out the synchronised explosion of 500 bombs in 63 of the country's 64 districts. It is however far less clear whether the existence of these groups constitutes a meaningful step towards religious nationalism as such; whether these groups have any real influence amongst the political elite; and whether they have significant citizen support. These remain important and in some respects, open questions. The 15th amendment retained Islam as the state religion but also restored secularism and the freedom of religion in the Constitution. Political Islam in Bangladesh therefore seems to represent an ideological resource that taps into notions about Bangladeshi identity and which can be drawn upon tactically by the political elite rather than a measured approach to institute Islamic law or a public acceptance for religious fundamentalism in mainstream politics.

## METHODS

The chapter draws on original data derived from a 2010 national household survey commissioned by the The Daily Star, the largest circulating English daily newspaper in Bangladesh; and Nielson Bangladesh, a specialised information and measurement company. The 2010 survey followed up a Governance Barometer survey carried out by the Institute of Governance Studies in 2009 (IGS 2008) and adopted a similar methodological approach. The overall aim of both surveys was to explore public perceptions on political life in Bangladesh. A total of 2,520 respondents took part in the 2010 survey from 44 districts covering all 7 administrative divisions of Bangladesh. Thirty percent of respondents were urban residents and seventy percent were rural. All respondents were adults (i.e. over 18 years of age), and the sample had an equal number of men and women.

The survey asked a range of questions about attitudes towards democracy and governance more generally, mostly in the form of statements with which respondents could express agreement or disagreement, in some cases on a typical Likert scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'), in other cases a binary yes/no option. Our methodological approach was as follows. First we examined descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify different categories of respondents. As we discuss in the next section, cross-tabulating questions relating to the position of Islam with respect to democracy produces some naively counterintuitive results, and we use these results as the basis of our categorisation.

Using these categories, we proceed to examine the socio-economic determinants of support for democracy. In particular, as articulated above, we are interested in *different* justifications for democracy and how far these can be explained. We exploit a range of questions that elicit responses to a range of ethical and practical questions about democracy to construct indices using factor analysis. Factor analysis is based on the presumption that responses to such categorical questions are reflective of an underlying 'latent' continuous variable and uses the cross-correlation between different answers to these categorical questions to construct a factor loading to estimate the latent variable for each individual. We discuss the specific construction of the indices we use below.

Regression analysis was performed using the *Stata* software with robust standard errors calculated using the survey sample frame.

## SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY: AMBIGUOUS DEMOCRATS AND AMBIGUOUS THEOCRACTS

The starting point for our analysis is to assess the level of support citizens have for democracy in Bangladesh. We have evidence from previous research that levels of support have been traditionally high. Thus the 2001 World Values Survey found that as many as 98 percent of respondent in Bangladesh approved of the democratic system, and this overwhelming endorsement was also evident in more recent carried out under the *State of Democracy in South Asia* project (de Souza *et al* 2008). It is important however to revisit the core question about support for democracy because since the two referenced surveys, Bangladesh's experience of democracy has had to face two years of military backed caretaker government (2007-2009) which was interpreted by some as a reversal of the democratic project (Diamond 2011). Furthermore following the 2007-2009 period, there have been continuous media reports and commentaries suggesting the association of the democratic machinery – political parties in particular – with patronage, violence and intimidation has increased.

The survey asked general questions about support for democracy in three different ways:

- How suitable is democracy for Bangladesh (on a five-point scale from 'not at all suitable' to 'very suitable')?;
- What is the best form of government for Bangladesh (democracy, Islamic state, military government, or other)?; and,
- Do you agree that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government (yes/no)?

In each case, support for democracy was overwhelming: 87 per cent agreed that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, 83 per cent that democracy was the best form of government for Bangladesh, and 75 per cent that democracy was 'suitable' or 'very suitable' for Bangladesh. Despite therefore the apparent reversals or setbacks to the democratic project, levels of support for democracy remain remarkably high in Bangladesh. This is not a trivial finding given the recent state of politics in Bangladesh. Indeed one might be tempted to ask the question: why in the face of so many political setbacks, has the level of support for democracy remained so high in Bangladesh? The most obvious response to this is that Bangladesh citizens prefer democracy to other alternatives. We will examine this below. Here however it is important to acknowledge an equally plausible explanation which is rarely highlighted in the literature, namely that democracy in Bangladesh has become an established part of the polity and actually possesses quite resilient roots. This interpretation would certainly be consistent with a number of observations about Bangladesh including high levels of political participation and a strong tradition of citizen activism expressed through various civil society initiatives as well as through forms of unruly politics (see Hossain this volume).

Having established high levels of support for democracy, we need to explore further the aggregate statistics because they could camouflage the kinds of ambiguity we seek to

explain in this chapter. Thus for example, while the data clearly shows that people *preferred* democracy to any other kind of government and also felt that it was *suitable for Bangladesh*, there is an important difference in response rates. In fact, of the 87 per cent who stated that democracy was preferable, only 20 per cent also thought it was *suited* for Bangladesh. Rather than view these results as evidence of inconsistent or unreliable responses, we see this as evidence of the kinds of ambiguous or pluralist attitudes towards democracy we want to explore in this chapter.

A similar initially counterintuitive finding emerges when we compare attitudes towards democracy and attitudes towards a secular/Islamic state. Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country in the world and as argued above, Islam is a prominent if not hyper-visible but contested feature of the current political landscape. One of the curious observations about the rise of 'political Islam' in Bangladesh is that it seems to have occurred without resulting in a concomitant erosion of the secular character of the polity. Hence the present government has gone out of its way to present the country as a secular democracy, and yet it retained Islam as the state religion in the recent constitutional amendment. At the same time as it proclaims its Islamic credentials, it has supported, if not engineered, some high-visible attacks on the most prominent of Islamic parties. The relationships therefore between secularism, Islam and democratic commitments in Bangladesh are complex, reflecting a fundamental and as yet unresolved tension around national identity. The question therefore of whether Bangladesh is a country of secular Bengalis or Muslim Bangladeshis may be old (Uddin 2006) but it continues to agitate and divide the country today.

Simple cross-tabulations from the survey illustrate this point. Respondents were asked two questions that related directly to Bangladesh's potential status as an Islamic state. The first asked simply how far respondents agreed with the statement that Bangladesh should be an Islamic State; the second asked respondents *which* form of government was *most* suitable for Bangladesh, with an Islamic State listed as one of five options which also included democracy and military rule. The point here is that the second question has 'exclusive responses' in that it forces respondents to select between an 'Islamic State' and 'democracy'. The first question instead is non-exclusive. Table 1 crosstabulates the proportion of respondents who agreed (or 'strongly agreed') that Bangladesh should be an Islamic State (i.e. the non-exclusive question) with the proportion who thought that an Islamic State was the most suitable form of government for Bangladesh (the exclusive option). For both questions, we have excluded non-Muslim responses. When presented with the non-exclusionary question therefore, just over three-quarters of Muslim respondents agreed that Bangladesh should be an Islamic state (of these, over 50% 'strongly agreed'). However when asked to select *between* an Islamic State, democracy and other institutional options, almost 9 in 10 respondents selected *against* an Islamic State and the overwhelming majority selected 'democracy' instead. This leads to a number of important reflections. First, it is clear that respondents do not typically see a contradiction between an Islamic State and democracy (but neither do they see them as co-terminous). In part, this reflects the fact

that citizens in Bangladesh are quite accustomed to the intermingling of religion and politics: the formal commitment to democracy has gone hand in hand with the identification of Islam as the state religion; some religious leaders have gone on to forge relatively successful careers in electoral politics; many religious parties have worked within the parameters of electoral democracy as opposed to calling for its rejection. For the many therefore, the rise of 'political Islam' does not pose the kind of direct threat to democracy that is often associated with other Islamicists' movements (Nasr 2005).

The analysis of Table 1 allows for a different interpretation which has also been suggested in work by de Souza *et al* (2008). Their research looked at the experience of democracy across South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Forty percent of their respondents agreed that religious leaders rather than politicians should make the important decisions in the country. Response patterns across countries of course varied, with the majority support in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Rather than see this as an indication of citizens' desire for a religious as opposed to democratic regime, the authors suggest that support for religion may be "an expression of unease with the received model of democracy and a desire to combine the existing model with other virtues" (de Souza *et al* 2008:95). This is not only consistent with the analysis presented in Table 1, but resonates very strongly with perceptions that politics in Bangladesh is dysfunctional and dominated by money, corruption, goons and people with little background and training in formal politics (Khan 2003).

**Table 1: Perspectives on Islamic State**

| % of total Muslim respondents | | "Islamic state is the best form of government for Bangladesh" | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Disagree | Agree | Total |
| "Bangladesh should be an Islamic state" | Disagree | 23.1 | 0.5 | 23.6 |
| | Agree | 65.1 | 11.4 | 76.4 |
| | Total | 88.1 | 11.9 | 100.0 |

Nonetheless, we have now two areas of political ambiguity: ambiguity over how preferable democracy is *per se*; and, among Muslim respondents, ambiguity over its relationship to this issue of an Islamic State. By describing attitudes as ambiguous, we are not making normative judgments. The global ideal of democracy can be translated into many forms and our analysis so far suggests that the democratic process in Bangladesh, in both fragile and consolidated moments, offers new expressions of democracy permeated with distinctive and interesting meanings.

Before examining *why* people might hold ambiguous views, it is worth examining *who* holds such views. In order to do so, we define two new analytical categories. We define 'ambiguous democrats' as those who expressed a preference for democracy over all other forms of government, but who also did not see it as suitable for Bangladesh. This group accounts for 20.4 per cent of responses. We define 'ambiguous theocrats' as

those Muslims who thought that Bangladesh should be an Islamic state but who also expressed a preference for democracy over all other forms of government, including an Islamic state. This group accounts for 7.8 per cent of Muslim responses (of whom around 70 per cent were also 'ambiguous democrats').

We run simple probit regressions on these new variables with a range of standard social and demographic predictor variables: age, gender, level of education, income, and urban residence. For ambiguous democrats, we also include religion. The results are presented in Table 2 and show clear and divergent trends. Basic demographic characteristics—age and gender—are not significant in explaining ambiguous attitudes, neither is education below the tertiary level. However ambiguous democrats are significantly more likely to have tertiary education, tend to live in urban areas, and tend to have higher incomes. What is striking about this finding is that other studies (deSouza *et al* 2008, Shastrri and Palshikar 2010) have found that people with these same characteristics (i.e. higher levels of education, urban residence and higher incomes) are far more likely to support democracy that those without. So what might drive support for democracy, also influences people's 'ambiguity' towards it – ambiguity again understood not in normative terms.

Our analysis also suggests that ambiguous democrats are significantly less common among non-Muslims. This, we would argue, is less the effect of religion or some cultural trait and more to do with wider political economy considerations. With the rise of Islam in public life, the minority-majority dynamic has become more salient in Bangladesh, forcing many minority groups into significantly more vulnerable situations. Minority groups are therefore more likely to support democracy because of its association – at least in principle – with tolerance and respect. This is consistent with other findings in South Asia in which minorities value the 'freedom qualities' of democracy significantly more than their 'majority' co-nationals (Shastri and Palshikar 2010).

If we then look at the data on ambiguous theocrats, we see that they are less likely to have tertiary education (although this result is not statistically significant), tend to live in rural areas, and tend to have lower incomes. Put in more straightforward terms, democratic ambiguity is primarily an urban middle class phenomenon; theocratic ambiguity is more a phenomenon of the rural poor, although the strength of this association is weaker.

**Table 2: Probit results for 'ambiguous democrats' and 'ambiguous theocrats'**

| | (1) Ambiguous Democrats | (2) Ambiguous Theocrats |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.000481 | -0.00111 |
| | (0.00241) | (0.00269) |
| Male | 0.00711 | 0.164 |
| | (0.0655) | (0.110) |
| Primary completed | -0.0530 | 0.0515 |
| | (0.0785) | (0.0998) |
| Secondary completed | 0.0271 | -0.0640 |
| | (0.0945) | (0.119) |
| Tertiary completed | 0.237** | -0.0405 |
| | (0.113) | (0.158) |
| Urban residence | 0.239*** | -0.191** |
| | (0.0896) | (0.0954) |
| Family income (000s) | 0.00831*** | -0.00797** |
| | (0.00222) | (0.00388) |
| Non-Muslim | -0.282*** | |
| | (0.104) | |
| Constant | -1.034*** | -1.329*** |
| | (0.138) | (0.156) |
| Observations | 2,949 | 2,672 |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; asterisks indicate significance at level *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; equation (2) restricted to Muslim respondents only

**AMBIGUITY AROUND GOVERNANCE: A QUESTION OF BEING PRAGMATIC?**

In our introductory section, we discussed the different ways in which people might support democratic institutions, distinguishing between those with an intrinsic commitment to democracy from those with a more instrumental commitment (Inglehart and Welzel, 2003, Bratton and Mattes 2001). Inspired by the fact that this distinction has yielded insightful results in a range of national and regional contexts, here we want to explore further the ambiguities we have found above and ask how far they can be explained by the 'differences in support for democracy distinction'. This we contend is an important question for it helps move the debate beyond the question about whether Bangladesh citizens support democracy to ask a deeper question, with stronger diagnostic power, about the quality of support for democracy.

The survey asked respondents to identify reasons they considered essential for democracy. Multiple responses were allowed. We divided the different responses into reasons which relate to the 'pragmatic' benefits of democracy and those that relate to the 'ethical' imperatives for democracy, the former relating to the more instrumental or overt support for democracy and the latter reflecting a more intrinsic or principled

position. These were then coded to generate a 'pragmatism' and 'ethicality' index, and factor analysis was used to create a single index for each dimension. The factor loadings, along with the relevant statements, are reported in Table 3. Since factor analysis generates measures with a mean of zero and standard deviation of 1, it is not possible to ask whether people are *more* pragmatic than ethical in their support of democracy (or vice versa). We can however examine how far an individual's commitment to democracy is lined to pragmatic or ethical reasons. This, as we will see below, gives surprising and strong results.

**Table 3: Factor loadings for indices**

| Pragmatism Index | | Ethicality Index | |
|---|---|---|---|
| The courts are independent from political influence | 0.332 | Elected representatives sit in parliament to make laws and hold the government to account | 0.397 |
| The government is responding to meet the basic needs of people | 0.200 | Government institutions and officials (court/police/bureaucracy) serve the people | 0.293 |
| We can carry out business/economic activities without fear of extortion | 0.423 | We are free to criticize those in power | 0.469 |
| We can complete our education without disruption | 0.303 | Everyone is free to practice their own religion | 0.152 |
| Our basic needs are being fulfilled (education, health care, housing, clean water, sanitation) | 0.197 | We are free to engage in political activities | 0.412 |
| We don't have to bribe officials | 0.360 | We are free to speak our mind | 0.315 |
| Police and security services don't harass people | 0.287 | Everyone has equal rights | 0.351 |
| Minorities are protected from attacks or harassment | 0.445 | Media can report freely without fear or pressure | 0.509 |
| Civil society groups can work freely without pressure or harassment. | 0.452 | | |

The first question we can ask is descriptive: do our categories of ambiguous democrats and ambiguous theocrats differ significantly from the rest of the population on these two indices? In order to answer this, we run four t-tests to explore differences between each of our two groups and the rest of the population. As with the regressions reported above, we compare ambiguous theocrats only with other Muslims. The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 4. They show that ambiguous democrats are indeed significantly more 'pragmatic' in their attitude towards democracy than others, but do not differ significantly from the rest of the population in terms of 'ethicality'. In contrast, ambiguous theocrats are significantly more 'ethical' in their attitude towards

democracy that other Muslims, but do not differ significantly in terms of 'pragmatics'. These differences are particularly noteworthy given the reasonably high level of correlation between the two indices, and can be taken as confirmation that the indices are indeed picking up separate attitudinal dimensions.

**Table 4: Ambiguity and justifications for democracy: t-test statistics**

| | Pragmatic Index | Ethical Index |
|---|---|---|
| Ambiguous Democrats | 0.049 | 0.013 |
| Others | -0.011 | 0.001 |
| t-stat. | 1.800** | 0.360 |
| Ambiguous Theocrats | 0.050 | 0.162 |
| Other Muslims | -0.005 | -0.016 |
| t-stat. | 1.066 | 3.307*** |

Note: asterisks indicate significance at level *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

What have we established so far, then? We have established that while overall levels of support for democracy in Bangladesh are apparently high, a sizeable proportion of Bangladeshis hold 'ambiguous attitudes' toward democracy— either because they report thinking that democracy is the best form of government but may not be suitable for Bangladesh (our 'ambiguous democrats'), or because of ambivalence towards the relationship between democracy and the prospect of an Islamic State (our 'ambiguous theocrats'). Further, we have established that these groups differ markedly from the rest of the population in terms of the reasons they hold to value democracy, but in different ways: ambiguous democrats have a significantly more pragmatic view of democracy, while ambiguous theocrats have a significantly more ethical view of democracy.

Given this, the next logical question to ask is whether the same set of socio-economic variables that predicted the different dimensions of ambiguity are also effective at explaining the variation in conceptualisation of democracy. In order to do so, we can replicate the regression analysis in Table 2, using the two indices of Table 3 as the dependent variables instead of the two categories of ambiguity. Because the indices are continuous rather than binary variables, we use an OLS regression instead of a probit. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 5. The significant predictor variables for the pragmatism index overlap somewhat with those for democratic ambiguity, although not completely. Education is therefore highly significant at all levels, with a larger effect at each higher stage of education, and urban residents have a significantly higher level of pragmatism in their conceptualisation of democracy than rural residents. In contrast to the democratic ambiguity measure, we do not find a significant impact of income on pragmatic attitudes, while we do find a strong, significant gender effect— men have significantly more pragmatic conceptualisations of democracy then women. In broad terms therefore, our analysis points to the same conclusion that both 'pragmatic' and 'ambiguous' attitudes toward democracy are largely the domain of the

urban, educated classes. In contrast, there is very little similarity between the predictor variables for ambiguous theocrats and the predictor variables for the ethicality index: ambiguous theocrats were found to predominate among poorer, rural respondents, while the predictor variables for the ethicality index are, instead, similar to those for the pragmatism index, finding higher levels among men and among the more educated (although the impact of education is less strong, and insignificant at the primary level). While the coefficient on urban residence is negative, as for the ambiguous theocrats, it is insignificant.

**Table 5: OLS results for pragmatism index and ethicality index**

| VARIABLES | (3) Pragmatism Index | (4) Ethicality Index |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.00111 | -6.88e-05 |
| | (0.00104) | (0.00107) |
| Male | 0.0830*** | 0.0917*** |
| | (0.0274) | (0.0280) |
| Primary completed | 0.137*** | 0.0314 |
| | (0.0364) | (0.0372) |
| Secondary completed | 0.283*** | 0.250*** |
| | (0.0443) | (0.0452) |
| Tertiary completed | 0.305*** | 0.276*** |
| | (0.0569) | (0.0581) |
| Urban residence | 0.0769** | -0.0339 |
| | (0.0308) | (0.0315) |
| Family income (000s) | 0.00132 | 0.000770 |
| | (0.00116) | (0.00118) |
| Non-Muslim | 0.0390 | 0.0757 |
| | (0.0456) | (0.0466) |
| Constant | -0.288*** | -0.151*** |
| | (0.0538) | (0.0549) |
| Observations | 3,000 | 3,000 |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; asterisks denote significance at levels *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

We have established, then, clear evidence of a link between ambiguous attitudes towards democracy and a pragmatic conceptualisation of democracy, and that these appear to be more common characteristics of the urban, educated middle classes. While we observed a significantly higher level of ethical commitment to democracy among ambiguous theocrats, however, we have not been able to establish as strong a link

between these phenomena in socio-economic terms. The implication of this is that we are missing some intervening variable(s) that mediates between conceptualisation of democracy and actual policy preferences. One plausible candidate here is attitudes towards secularism.

In order to examine this, we construct another index using the same technique as above to measure respondents' attitudes to secularism using questions that relate to religious institutions but not directly to democratic institutions or the nature of democracy.[1] The correlation between this new index and our two previous indices is very low (0.019 for the pragmatism index; 0.013 for the ethicality index), confirming that attitudes towards secularism are indeed orthogonal to conceptualisations of democracy. In other words, both extreme secularists and extreme non-secularists can and do hold pragmatic and/or ethical conceptualisations of democracy.

Armed with these three indices, we can now return to the basic question with which we began: is democracy *always* preferable to other forms of government? We run three probit regressions on this model (see Table 6): the first model only includes our socio-economic basket of variables, the second model includes the pragmatism and ethicality indices, and the third model includes the secularism index. The socio-economic control variables are fairly consistent across all the models. Education is positive and significant, with a larger coefficient at each stage of education: higher levels of education correspond to higher commitment to democracy. Urban residence is consistently *negative* and significant. When we include the pragmatic and ethicality indices, we find them both significant but pointing in opposite directions — a finding all the more remarkable given the moderately high correlation between the indices. On the one hand, a pragmatic conceptualisation of democracy is associated with a lower commitment to democracy as *always* preferable to other forms of government. On the other hand, an ethical conceptualisation of democracy is associated with a higher commitment, although at a weaker level of significance. In the final model, however, when we include the secularism index, this is returned as very strongly and significantly correlated with a higher degree of commitment to democracy, and the ethicality index in this model is even weaker in significance, at the 10% threshold.

**Table 6: Probit regressions - Is democracy always preferable?**

| | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|---|---|---|---|

[1] The questions used are: All major decisions should be taken by religious leaders (agree/disagree); Do you consider yourself a religious person (yes/no)?; Are you involved in a mosque/temple/church committee etc. (yes/no)?; and, Are religious parties acceptable (yes/no)?. The scale was inverted to make more secular responses positive and less secular negative.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.00337 | 0.00356 | 0.00537** |
| | (0.00236) | (0.00237) | (0.00258) |
| Male | 0.0851 | 0.0886 | 0.0391 |
| | (0.0607) | (0.0610) | (0.0663) |
| Primary completed | 0.290*** | 0.307*** | 0.354*** |
| | (0.0767) | (0.0771) | (0.0843) |
| Secondary completed | 0.391*** | 0.409*** | 0.352*** |
| | (0.0961) | (0.0971) | (0.104) |
| Tertiary completed | 0.711*** | 0.733*** | 0.518*** |
| | (0.138) | (0.140) | (0.147) |
| Urban residence | -0.204*** | -0.191*** | -0.278*** |
| | (0.0675) | (0.0678) | (0.0737) |
| Family income (000s) | -0.00254 | -0.00238 | -0.00395 |
| | (0.00247) | (0.00249) | (0.00281) |
| Non-Muslim | 0.207* | 0.210* | -0.134 |
| | (0.109) | (0.110) | (0.130) |
| Pragmatism Index | | -0.145*** | -0.146*** |
| | | (0.0486) | (0.0528) |
| Ethicality Index | | 0.0983** | 0.0958* |
| | | (0.0482) | (0.0520) |
| Secularism Index | | | 0.571*** |
| | | | (0.0557) |
| Constant | 0.572*** | 0.560*** | 0.632*** |
| | (0.132) | (0.132) | (0.144) |
| Observations | 3,000 | 3,000 | 2,803 |

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In one sense these findings are not that surprising, at least within the theoretical framework laid out in our first section. They confirm that the 'demand' for democracy can indeed be premised on different conceptualisations of democracy within the population, and they also suggest that the nature of the democracy debate in Bangladesh is not so much about the 'rights' and 'freedoms' encapsulated in the ethical conceptualisation of democracy (see Shastri and Palshikar 2010 for a similar observation on Bangladesh), but more about negotiating the relationship between the pragmatic benefits of democracy on the one hand and the position of Islam in relation to the state on the other hand. Unpacking support for democracy in this way reinforces the need to think more seriously about policy interventions to deepen commitments to democracy. If there is no one size fits all model of democracy, it follows that there can be no one size fits all policy intervention.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we have established that levels of support for democracy in Bangladesh remain exceptionally high. This is consistent with previous findings and reports from over the past twenty years. The fact that support remains high despite the recent turbulent political history of Bangladesh, is encouraging and bodes very well for the future consolidation of democracy in the country.

Like other scholars however we need to be cautious when interpreting attitudinal responses to politics, especially those indicating high levels of support for democracy . Bangladeshis may overwhelmingly support democratic values and practices but this does not tell us much about the more important question of whether or not that support has any depth. De Souza *et al's* (2008) study into democracy in South Asia reported equally high levels of support for democracy in Bangladesh but then went on to argue very persuasively that the balance of democratic and non-democratic forces in Bangladesh was very precarious and lower than the South Asian average. In this chapter therefore, we have tried to advance the debate on support for democracy. We accept that the questions which drive our analysis are timeless, and indeed responses will change over time. Although our analysis and findings are exploratory, we still contend that they are important because they resonate with recent historical experiences of democracy, generate important insights and point to new avenues of future and much needed research.

Our first round of findings highlighted two interesting observations. First, although support for democracy is high, there is a significant number of 'committed democrats' who feel that democracy may not be appropriate for Bangladesh at the moment. Second, there is strong support for the idea of an Islamic State although this is significantly tempered when respondents are asked to choose between an Islamic state and a democratic form of government, with support for the latter being far more dominant. Do these two observations shed any light on arguments around the balance of democratic and non-democratic forces in Bangladesh? Our response to this question builds on observations outlined in the paragraph above. Democracy in Bangladesh, we argue, has strong and tested roots and therefore talk of its demise or rejection is perhaps exaggerated. However we accept that the success of democracy is by no means a foregone conclusion and based on this affirmation, we propose an alternative interpretation of our observations. We would like to argue that citizen's endorsement of an Islamic State (but note not of a theocracy) and their assessment that democracy may not be suitable for Bangladesh right now both indicate a desire not for a non-democratic regime but for a better democratic regime or an improved democratic model. In other words, both observations reflect a dissatisfaction with the democratic model as it stands but not necessarily with democracy *per se*. Furthermore, we would argue that the outcome of this critical reflection and questioning of specific democratic regimes which will give shape to the formation of future support for democracy in Bangladesh.

We built our analysis into the quality or depth of support for democracy around a distinction, found in the literature, between intrinsic and instrumental support. The former represents a commitment to democracy as an end in itself and is presented in our analysis as an ethical disposition to democracy. The latter instead sees democracy more as a means to an end, and is presented here as a pragmatic disposition. The crucial difference between the two is that the latter is conditional; and therefore in an important respect, can be withdrawn or increased on a temporary or permanent basis. The distinction is also useful because it taps into governance and political reform dynamics. Broadly speaking the intrinsic or ethical position reflects a normative commitment to democracy and therefore resonates with the language of rights, equality, voice and representation. The pragmatic approach to democracy instead has a strong institutional focus and highlights key areas of regime performance such as independence of the judiciary, welfare provision, levels of corruption, and so forth. Democracy in this context is a means to achieve positive outcomes in these different areas. The good governance agenda of course covers both rights and institutional reform but, as we argued in our introduction, in Bangladesh the emphasis to date has been on supporting institutional reform (ie the supply side of governance reforms).

The broad pattern which emerges from our findings is that the pragmatic disposition to democracy tends to find resonance among urban, educated and middle classes. Perhaps not surprisingly, this perspective is associated with a commitment to democracy which is lower than other respondents. The ethical disposition is less clearly associated with particular socio-economic groups, but significantly more associated with a commitment to democracy. This appears to reflect religious differences and possibly, preferences regarding an Islamic State'. At one level, these findings can be seen as consistent with our observations above about the questioning of specific models of democracy. For some the litmus test may be about regime performance (pragmatists) while for others it could be a question of values or principles (the ethical disposition).

Two further reflections however are important. First of all, our findings confirm that higher levels of education translate into a higher commitment to democracy and the effect is greater at each higher stage of education. We found this to be true in the case for both pragmatic and ethical dispositions. The significance of education is consistent with findings from across South Asia where graduates were found to be seven times more likely to support democracy than nonliterate people (de Souza *et al* 2008). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that access to education, which increases with successive generations, will continue to have a strong impact on the way democracy develops in Bangladesh at least in the short and medium terms.

Second, the high levels of association between urban middle classes and both the pragmatic disposition to democracy and the position of ambiguous democrat (ie committed democrat who prefers democracy but does not see it as suitable or Bangladesh), is an important finding. Bangladesh has a rapidly growing middle class made up of a relatively young demographic with high disposable incomes. It is also a

constituency about which we know very little, in particular its political aspirations and demands. A strong and plausible hypothesis to emerge from our analysis is that the urban middle classes tend to focus on the institutional benefits which democracy might deliver (the pragmatist disposition); and in order to secure these, certain aspects or qualities of the western liberal model of democracy may be sacrificed or relaxed (the ambiguous democrat). Put in more stark terms: if democracy is unable to deliver and respond to the demands and interests of the urban middle classes, support may well be withheld or withdrawn. It remains a moot point what these interests may be.

By looking at pragmatic and ethical dispositions to democracy we are able to conclude that the 'demand' for democracy can indeed be premised on different conceptualisations of democracy within the population. This opens up opportunities and risks in terms of governance interventions, as well as inevitable trade-offs. Our analysis suggests that institution-based approaches to governance reform are more likely to win the support of the educated urban middle classes. This however may come at the cost of a lower or at least more relaxed commitment to democracy. Furthermore while we accept that the need of middle class buy-in for future social change in Bangladesh (Devine and Wood 2009), there is a real risk that this strategy can put severe constraints on more radical reform in terms of wider redistributive effects. On the other hand, while there is some evidence that a rights based approach to democracy has a wide-support base and is linked to a higher commitment to democracy, equally important questions arise as to whether this approach can attract longer term middle class support and whether it opens up more space for religion to play an even more prominent role in politics.

The idea of democracy has taken firm roots in Bangladesh and the analysis presented here indicates that Bangladesh has also infused the idea of democracy with distinctive and transformative meanings and experiences. This iteration will continue in the future making it difficult to predict what form of democracy will evolve. It is therefore crucial that we pay more attention to the dynamics and relevance of support for democracy in Bangladesh. Pragmatic and ethical dispositions to democracy do not exist in a vacuum, but are both constitutive and reflective of wider constellations of values which can be found in the polity. Identifying and understanding the workings of these constellations and their interactions is, we would argue, the single most important governance challenge facing policy makers, practitioners and researchers alike.

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